

Salad Bars in the National School Lunch Program

Purpose:

This instruction sets forth the policy provide State agencies (SAs) with information on how salad bars can effectively be used in the service of reimbursable meals.

Scope:

Sponsors participating in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP).

Description:

This memo includes information on portion size, point of service, nutrient analysis, and food safety for school meals.

Background

USDA encourages the use of salad bars in the school meal programs. The 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans and the Institute of Medicine's (IOM) report, "The School Meals Building Blocks for Healthy Children" encourages the consumption of vegetables and fruits. The IOM report cites a 2007 study that determined that "salad bar programs in public schools indicate positive effects on fruit and vegetable consumption."

Additional data from the School Nutrition Dietary Assessment Study (SNDA) -II and SNDA-III describes the benefits of utilizing salad bars in the National School Lunch Program; schools with salad bars offer a wider variety of vegetables and fruits than other schools. Salad bars have the potential to improve nutrition and encourage the consumption of fruits, vegetables and legumes. In addition to the nutritional benefits, salad bars may lower plate waste in school feeding programs. While we recognize the many benefits of salad bars, we are cognizant that salad bars are not always a viable option in some school food service operations. We encourage school food authorities (SFAs) to incorporate salad bars into their school food service operations when possible, and to explore other creative options when salad bars are not an option.

There are many ways that salad bars can be incorporated into the reimbursable meal. Salad bars can feature a special fruit and vegetable theme, a baked potato bar, or a side salad. Salad bars can be set-up in a variety of ways, including pre-portioned and pre-packaged food items to emulate the grab-and-go concept to accommodate a high volume of students in a short period of time.

Portion Size

We have received numerous questions asking to clarify how the menu planner determines the minimum portion size. The minimum portion size should be an amount that is reasonable for that menu item. For instance, a cup of lettuce would be reasonable, but a cup of radish would be more than a child would normally consume.

When planning a salad bar as *part* of a reimbursable meal for Food Based Menu Planning, the minimum portion sizes must be consistent with the meal pattern for the age/grade group. For example, when choosing fruits/vegetables from the salad bar to meet the fruit/vegetable meal component, a menu planner might determine that $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of two or more different fruit/vegetables from the salad bar is the minimum for grades K-3, and $\frac{3}{4}$ cup of two or more different fruit/vegetables is the minimum for grades 4-12. Salad Bars can also be used to serve one component or multiple components. Multiple components require a combination of two different fruits/vegetables with a meat/meat alternate, such as a chef's salad or a fruit plate with cottage cheese. These food items must be served in the minimum amounts as required by the meal pattern. It is important to remember that any fruit or vegetable item meeting the $\frac{1}{8}$ cup minimum requirement, including those on the salad bar, can count towards the fruit/vegetable component.

The salad bar can also be used as an entrée or side salad when planning a salad bar as part of Nutrient Standard Menu Planning. The SFA must determine the minimum portion size in conjunction with the nutrient analysis. The menu planner must let the student and the cashier know the minimum amount that must be taken for the salad bar menu item(s) to count towards a reimbursable meal.

One of the challenges of a salad bar is to ensure that students actually take the minimum required portion size. Pre-portioning food items is one way that can assist staff in quickly identifying portion sizes. If not pre-portioning, then the cashier must be trained to judge accurately the quantities of self-serve items on student trays, to determine if the food/menu item can count toward a reimbursable meal.

Point of Service

Salad bars can serve as the complete reimbursable lunch (except for milk) or as a food or menu item that is part of a reimbursable lunch, depending on the food items available and how it is structured. It is critical to consider the location of the salad bar in relation to the Point of Service (POS). To ensure that each student's selections from the salad bar meet the required portions for an entrée or food/menu item, the POS must be stationed after the salad bar. If a school is not able to position the salad bar in a location prior to the POS, SAs may authorize alternatives to the POS lunch counts. SAs are encouraged to issue guidance which clearly identifies acceptable POS alternatives and instructions for proper implementation. SFAs may select one of the SA approved alternatives without prior approval. In addition, on a case-by-case basis, SAs may authorize SFAs to use other alternatives to the POS lunch count. Any such request to use an alternative lunch counting method must be submitted in writing to the SA for approval.

Nutrient Analysis

Chapter 7 of the Nutrient Analysis Protocols: How to Analyze Menus for USDA's School Meals Programs describes the process for conducting a nutrient analysis of a salad bar. The recipe and nutrient analysis of the food bar is based on historical usage of food bar items. Standardized recipes can be developed for food bars and entered into the nutrient database at the local level. The recipe should be constructed based on a typical day.

The menu planner would first determine the serving size. Second, the number of servings the recipe produces must be established. Finally, the menu planner must determine the amount of each food ingredient in the recipe by:

- Measuring the amount of each ingredient placed on the food bar on a typical day.
- Measuring the amount of each ingredient left over on the food bar at the end of the meal service and;
- Subtracting the amount left over from the amount placed on the food bar for each ingredient to determine the amount of each ingredient to enter for the recipe.

Food Safety

The Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) encourages schools to implement food safety standards and best practices on all foods served in the meal programs, to minimize the risk of food-borne illness among students. It is important to control contamination from all sources and maintain appropriate food temperatures to ensure food safety. The National Food Service Management Institute's *Best Practices: Handling Fresh Produce in Schools* fact sheet provides specific food safety recommendations for produce.

The NSF International (formerly the National Sanitation Foundation), (NSF) is an independent, not-for-profit, non-governmental organization that develops standards for foodservice equipment to promote sanitation and protect public health. There has been some concern that the NSF standards preclude the use of salad bars in elementary schools. The NSF standards **do not** preclude salad bars in elementary schools. Instead, the NSF standards provide two possible options when salad bars are provided to elementary school children (grades K-5):

1. All food should be pre-wrapped when used at a self service bar.
2. Students may be served from an open salad bar, with a solid food shield barrier between the students and the food. This option requires a server to portion the choices made by the student and pass the portioned items over the food shield to the student.

Resources

Please refer to the following technical assistance resources referring to salad bars for more information:

Nutrient Analysis Protocols: How to Analyze Menus for USDA's School Meals Programs – <http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/Resources/nutrientanalysis.html>

Reviewer's Guide to SMI Nutrition Reviews and Technical Assistance – Provides policies, procedures, and guidance for State agency personnel who conduct the nutrition standard reviews.

SMI Frequently Asked Questions – Provides detailed information on how to develop standardized recipes for salad bars. <http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/Resources/smi-faq.pdf>

School Lunch Salad Bars – Executive Summary – <http://www.fns.usda.gov/ora/menu/Published/CNP/FILES/saladbar.pdf>

Fruits and Vegetables Galore – Includes diagrams of salad bar setups and recipes for salads-to-go and salad shakers in the *Tricks of the Trade: Preparing Fruits and Vegetables* booklet. http://teamnutrition.usda.gov/Resources/fv_galore.html

Offer Vs Serve – Describes how salad bars work with OVS. <http://teamnutrition.usda.gov/Resources/OVS%20Resource%20Guide.pdf>

Several Strategies May Lower Plate Waste in School Feeding Programs Report – <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/FoodReview/Sep2002/frvol25i2g.pdf>

Best Practices: Handling Fresh Produce in Schools – The National Food Service Management Institute's fact sheet provides specific food safety recommendations for produce. http://www.fns.usda.gov/fns/safety/pdf/best_practices.pdf

Fruit and Vegetable Safety – Food safety resources that provide food safety information specifically for produce. http://healthymeals.nal.usda.gov/nal_display/index.php?info_center=14&tax_level=2&tax_subject=231&topic_id=1195

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